

2024

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#PumpkinSpice Report

**The Spice So Nice We
Measured It Twice**



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Researchers



Dr. Jin-A Choi

Assistant Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Choi received her PhD from the Stan Richards School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Choi's scholarship focuses on target advertising celebrity/social media influencer endorsements, digital advertising, text mining, and data analytics. Her research has been published in journals such as Journal of Global Marketing, Communication Studies, and others. Dr. Choi teaches a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses such as Social Media Analytics, Influencers and Opinion Leaders and Integrated Communications.



Dr. Yi Luo

Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Luo has conducted research in the areas of organizational change, sensemaking, leadership, social media and communication management, activism, organizational justice, and global public relations. Dr. Luo received her Ph.D in Communication from the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Luo's research has been published or accepted to be published in Public Relations Review, Journal of Public Relations Research, among many more. Dr. Luo teaches a variety of courses in organizational communication and public relations such as Cases and Campaigns, Communication Theories, Communication Research, Global Public Relations, Public Relations Ethics, New Media Applications in Organizations, and Digital Production.



Dr. Bond Benton

Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Benton's doctorate is from the University of Vienna with his dissertation focusing on the influence of culture on meaning. A particular focus of Dr. Benton's research is the interaction of media, branding, and cross-cultural communication as it relates to the values and decisions of constituencies. Dr. Benton's essays and research articles have appeared in journals and anthologies including The Journal of E-Learning and Digital Media, Public Relations Tactics, and many more. His first book, The Challenge of Working for Americans: Perspectives of an International Workforce, was released in 2014.

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Overview and Study Focus

As fall approaches, coffee lovers and dessert enthusiasts eagerly anticipate the arrival of pumpkin spice, which has become a seasonal rite. This season also invites critics to share memes and jokes about the omnipresence of cinnamon and nutmeg as the leaves change. In a period where differing tastes and opinions have reduced the number of spaces of cultural connection, pumpkin spice offers a unifying spectacle of taste and consumption. Love it or hate it, pumpkin spice offers an annual moment of *Vox populi* (or *Vox pumpkini*, in this case).

Over the last three years, researchers from the Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III Center for Strategic Communication in the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University has monitored social media conversation, tone, themes, and sentiment related to the arrival of “pumpkin spice season.” In our initial study of the trend, we identified key elements that explain interest in pumpkin spice.

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Overview and Study Focus

The 2022 #Pumpkin Spice report (Choi, Benton, & Luo, 2022) notes that pumpkin spice may only be a mix of a blend of cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, allspice, and cloves, but it has become an enduring staple of the transition to autumn for both consumers and brands. Commonly attributed to the 2003 introduction of “Pumpkin Spice Latte” by the Starbucks company (Nosowitz, 2022), the flavor and market utilization of pumpkin spice branding has been enduring in terms of culture and consumption. Identification of the impetus for pumpkin spice to become a staple of seasonal transition can be explained by a range of consumer motivations. Millennial preferences appear to be a significant driving factor towards pumpkin spice enthusiasm (Hoffower, 2021). The time bound nature of pumpkin spice also provides a “fear of missing out” (FOMO) moment for enthusiasts as the flavor is available for only a limited amount of time. Additionally, research on the psychological effects of the smell/taste aspects of pumpkin spice indicates that the additional sensory dimension of the trend leads to associative feelings of nostalgia and warmth (Rosen, 2021). Interestingly, cultural scholars have argued that the associative sensory construction of pumpkin spice has contextually gendered its consumption as feminine (Powell and Engelhardt, 2015). While some have argued that there is a fad dimension to the phenomena that ensures it will inevitably fade (Wiedemann, 2015), trend analysis suggests that enthusiasm for pumpkin spice continues largely unabated—with interest levels remaining quite high every autumn.

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Overview and Study Focus

The mix of cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, allspice, and cloves has produced a magical combination that changed the world. In early spring 2003, a team at Starbucks gathered in the “Liquid Lab” on the 7th floor of their Seattle headquarters. They brought kitschy fall decorations and pumpkin pies to brainstorm ideas. By sampling pumpkin pie with hot espresso, they identified which flavors complemented each other best. Over the next three months, they refined a recipe that combined espresso, pumpkin spice sauce, and steamed milk, topped with whipped cream and a sprinkle of pumpkin pie topping. (Starbucks Stories, 2023).

That moment of genesis has had enormous implications not only for Starbucks, but to the fabric of popular culture. Research suggests that “the business of the ‘pumpkin flavor’ itself is worth over \$802 million, per data from NielsenIQ” (DiPalma, 2023). Like many cultural phenomena, pumpkin spice has spawned communities of fierce supporters and ardent detractors. It is that evolving and contested social space of pumpkin spice that makes it particularly relevant to evaluate in terms of its presentation and reaction in social media (Choi, Benton, & Luo, 2022; Choi, Luo, Benton, & Green, 2023; Hagy, 2023).

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Overview and Study Focus

Previous studies provide valuable context for our 2024 investigation into pumpkin spice on social media. In 2022, we found that 55% of social media mentions about pumpkin spice were positive, reflecting a post-pandemic surge in demand for pumpkin spice products. However, in 2023, positive sentiment declined to 45%, accompanied by increased mockery and sarcasm (Choi, Luo, Benton, & Green 2023). Despite these changes, posts still expressed strong emotions like “joy” and “excitement,” supported by \$802 million in pumpkin spice sales during that time.

Starbucks consistently emerged as the most mentioned brand, with online searches far surpassing those of competitors. These findings prompt us to continue monitoring trends and themes in pumpkin spice discussions. We aim to explore whether positive sentiment will shift toward greater cynicism and “pumpkin spice fatigue,” if Starbucks will maintain its dominant position in the market, and what consumers truly associate with pumpkin spice. These questions will guide our 2024 study.

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To examine how social media users have conversed about topics related to pumpkin spice, this study used Brandwatch to collect social media discussions. Brandwatch was utilized as a social listening tool to understand the sentiment, perceptions, trends, and reactions of social media users' conversations pertaining to pumpkin spice across various social media platforms, such as X, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, etc.

After an initial online search on popular terms favored by social media users in their online discussions related to the topic of pumpkin spice, this study utilized key words and phrases such as “pumpkin spice,” “pumpkin spice latte,” and “PSL” to create a search query for data collection. Particularly, the period of August 22 to September 23, 2024 was chosen for the following two reasons. First, Starbucks launched its pumpkin-themed fall beverages on August 22, 2024, and the first day of Fall arrived on September 23, 2024. Understanding the shifts in social media users' conversation volumes, sentiments, and key topics can provide valuable insights on how social media users have embraced another pumpkin spice season. Second, we are publicly releasing this study as a celebration for the National Pumpkin Spice Day on October 1, 2024.

The search query on Brandwatch yielded a total of 209k social conversations from 147k unique social posts from August 22 to September 23, 2024, representing a staggering 895% increasing from the 2023 volume (i.e., 21k) of social conversations related to pumpkin spice. Building on our 2022 and 2023 Pumpkin Spice studies, we found that 72% of social media discussions about pumpkin spice took place on X (formerly known as Twitter). The volume of posts began to peak on August 22, coinciding with Starbucks' release of its fall menu featuring new pumpkin spice and apple cider drinks. We recorded the highest volume of discussions on August 24, just two days after Starbucks' launch, with an impressive 15.7k posts on X alone. However, this surge in conversations started to decline during the last week of August, likely influenced by the warmer temperatures in many regions at that time.

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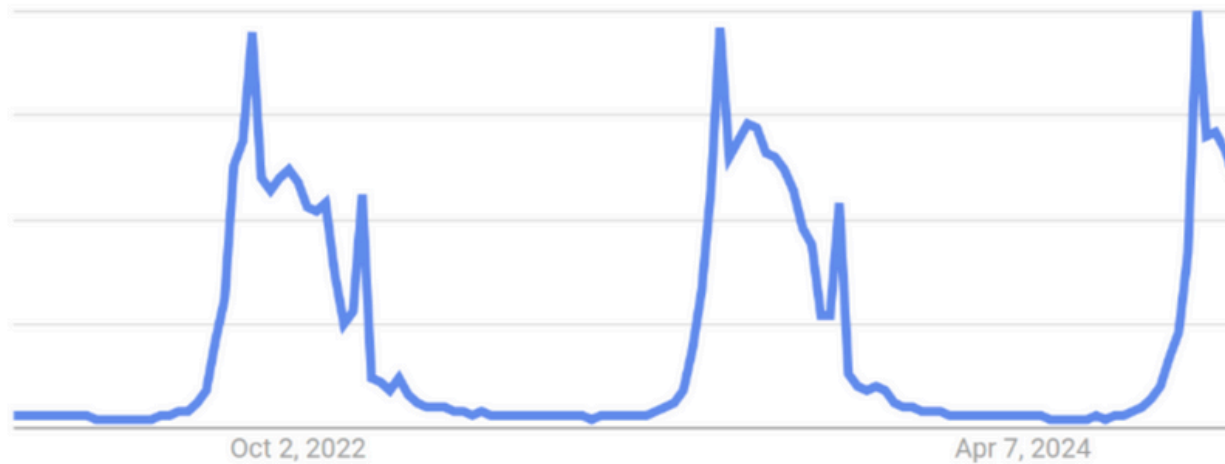
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A Google Trends Analysis was also conducted to assess search frequency, which allows for identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al., 2016). These analyses are “normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search volume activity for that term” (Arora et al., 2019, p. 338). Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010).

Google Trends Analysis (see graph below) of “pumpkin spice” in the past five years showed that the highest share of search frequency in history occurred in 2024 reaching the 100-point mark as the Starbucks PSL returned. This is four points higher than the level of search interest for pumpkin spice in 2023. As noted, search frequency reliably indicates corresponding social media behavior and purchase intention.

Pumpkin Spice Search Interest Online



NOTE: relative search frequency is calculated on a 100-point scale

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Results

Starbucks PSL signals the beginning of the Fall Season

Starbucks still leads the way when it comes to everything pumpkin spice. PSL, or Pumpkin Spice Latte, was introduced by Starbucks in 2003 but the pumpkin spice flavor has since been duplicated by large brands such as Dunkin’ and Wendy’s as well as local coffee shops. However, on the date of the Starbucks PSL release, social media discussion surged nearly 3 times, at over 15k social media mentions on August 22, 2024 than that of the typical average (approximately 6k) conversation on PSL. In this 2024 study, new brands such as Krispy Kreme and Einstein Bros emerged to join the pumpkin spice trend.

A new and surprising finding was the discovery of Amazon as an emerging brand in our data. Although less emphasized, brands such as Walmart and Aldi also emerged. Due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Starbucks had been boycotted for some time. However, the arrival of PSL at Starbucks has divided the boycotters. Some have succumbed to Starbucks’ Pumpkin Spice Lattes, while others turned to home recipes to mimic the Starbucks PSL. Therefore “pumpkin spice syrup” was mentioned frequently in posts discussing where to buy the syrup (ie. Amazon, Walmart, etc.) as well as an open call for action to support independent and local coffee shops as they will likely also carry pumpkin spice syrup. Either way, regardless of the many brands that carry pumpkin spice products, the social media data shows that people prefer specifically “Starbucks Pumpkin Spice Latte” above others. In addition to the season being referred to as “fall” or “autumn,” social media users use “PSL season”, “pumpkin spice season,” and “#psl time of year” to describe fall.



Too Early for Fall

There was heightened negative emotion (26%) vs. positive (17%) due to what appears to be confusion and fatigue. Starbucks released its fall drink on August 22th this year. Compared to 2022, when Starbucks released PSLs on August 30th , this year's release felt premature to many social media audiences. Considering that the autumnal equinox was September 22 nd this year, Starbucks brought back PSL a month prior to the beginning of Fall. As PSL has become synonymous to the fall season, the arrival of pumpkin spice means that fall has arrived. However, due to the warmer weather, many were not prepared to pick up the hot drink yet and words such as “early,” “summer,” “early for pumpkin spice” emerged, especially in the last week of August. The words “cold,” “chill,” “leaves,” “sweaters” and “autumn” emerged in connection to PSL as the temperature lowered in September.

Instagram-able Moment

The love for pumpkin spice is pronounced on social media. Celebration of the return of PSL means more than a drink. It means that chilly mornings of fall have arrived. The fall spices evoke nostalgia thus social media users love to share personal experiences and stories involving PSL. From “boots, big sweaters, colorful leaves, favorite movies and books,” social media users look forward to the posting about seasonal change on social media.



Starbucks, with its 18 million followers (compared to Dunkin’s 3 million followers), seemingly gives its consumers “bragging rights.” Starbucks drinks are not just beverages but an experience unlike any other coffee shops. Starbucks is already included in the “basic girl starter pack,” (referring to women who consume mainstream trends and products), where it is essential to be seen or photographed with a Starbucks drink in hand to complete one’s aesthetics or look. When Fall season rolls around, the starter pack includes items such as UGGs, yoga pants, and of course, #pumpkinspicelattes. Thanks to the culture of showcasing or authenticating self-identities on social media, pumpkin spice is especially visible in the social media sphere. Whether it is proclaiming one’s love for the season’s drink or showcasing sarcastically humorous hate, social media users see PSL as an opportunity to share their subjective opinions on the taste and trend of PSL. Beyond Starbucks, social media users shared new pumpkin spice discoveries from pancakes, whiskey, Slurpees and dog treats to room spray.

Competition from Apple

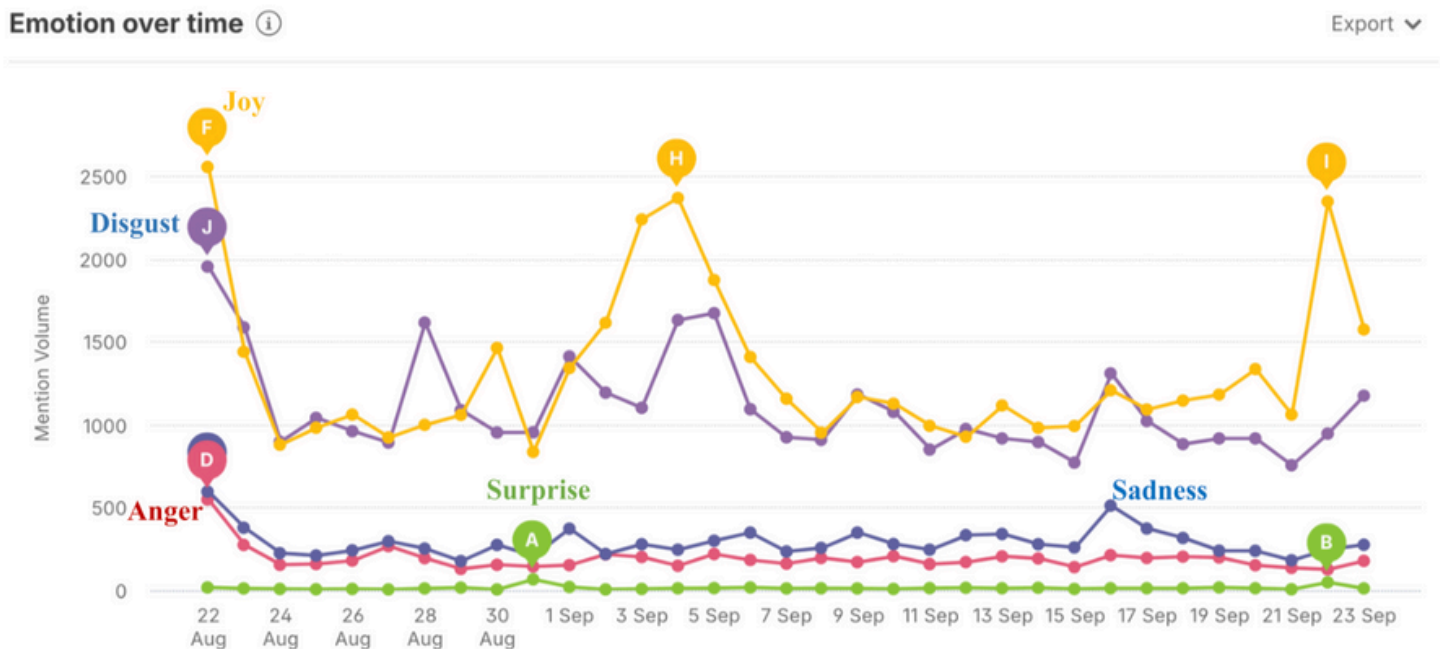
In the previous two years, no other flavors were discovered in the data to compete with pumpkin spice. However, in the 2024 study, apple emerged as a highly anticipated flavor for fall. From “spiced apple,” “apple cinnamon,” “apple cider” and “apple cider donut,” apple was discussed frequently. Additionally, apple was frequently discussed as a preferred alternative fall item to pumpkin spice, dividing the two flavors to compete against each other instead of going together. A comparison of Google Trends for “Pumpkin spice latte,” “Pumpkin spice,” and “Apple cider” reveals that interest in apple cider has surpassed that of pumpkin spice since late August. This intriguing trend suggests a competitive shift between the two flavors.



Health Concerns

This year, a more health-conscious theme emerged in social media discussions, distinct from our previous 2022 (Choi, Benton, & Luo, 2022) and 2023 (Choi, Luo, Benton & Green, 2023) pumpkin spice studies. Conversations increasingly focused on sugar-free, calorie-conscious, and dairy-free pumpkin spice food and drinks. Social media users enthusiastically shared their recipes and tips for creating healthier pumpkin spice pastries, beverages, and dishes. A significant theme in these discussions revolved around recommendations and feedback on healthier pumpkin spice options, including coffee creamers, syrups, protein powders, sweeteners, and fruit pouches. This shift reflects a growing desire among consumers to enjoy seasonal flavors while prioritizing their health and dietary preferences.

Sentiment for Pumpkin Spice



Results

Echoing our previous Pumpkin Spice studies, joy continues to appear as the dominant emotions that social media users expressed across platforms. Unsurprisingly, the highest peaks of joy appeared on August 22 (i.e., the launch day of Starbucks' fall menu). Starbucks' launch marked a tide of marketing campaigns centered around pumpkin spice, which was paralleled by social media users' joyful emotions, such as excitement for pumpkin spice seasons, celebration of the pumpkin spice's return, and welcoming of the fall season. Pumpkin spice lovers rejoiced with the return of the beloved flavor. Specially, the resurgence of various pumpkin spice products (e.g., pumpkin spiced deodorant, pumpkin spiced pastries, pumpkin spiced beer, pumpkin spiced ice cream, pumpkin spiced candles, pumpkin spiced creamer, pumpkin spiced oat bars, pumpkin spiced almond milk, etc.) triggered waves of social expressions for seasonal joy represented by this unique pumpkin spice flavor.

The arrival of fall marks a shift towards cozy vibes and autumnal aesthetics. Evidently, the enthusiasm toward pumpkin spice continued to drive the joy sentiment in mid and late September. Social mentions of taste-testing opportunities and pumpkin spice flavored or scented items flooded major social media platforms. Pumpkin spice lovers seemed eager to indulge in everything pumpkin spice, enjoy the warmth and comfort brought by these seasonal delights, and to incorporate pumpkin spice into their daily routines.

Although the frenzy toward pumpkin spice dominated the social discussions, this fall season spice also stirred mixed emotions. By a closer look at the sample posts related to negative sentiments, such as disgust or anger, social media users expressed their distain at having pumpkin spice too early in August and complained about the overwhelming presence of pumpkin spice in various products. For example, some disgruntled users vented: "Keep your pumpkin spice garbage. I want the classics," "The worldwide plague has returned and it's seemingly everywhere. Please get vaccinated against Pumpkin Spice-19!," or "Whoever found the gates of hell could you please close them I'm sure the outside temperature is killing the pumpkin spice sales at Starbucks." The debate over the timing and extent of pumpkin spice offerings reflects a broader cultural divide on season flavors and consumer preferences.

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The arrival of pumpkin spice heralds the transition to autumn, evoking nostalgia and anticipation for cooler weather and cozy comforts. This year, social discussions around pumpkin spice surged by an impressive 895% compared to 2023, reflecting an ever-growing enthusiasm for this seasonal favorite. The appeal of pumpkin spice goes beyond flavor; it has sparked a cultural phenomenon that infiltrates various industries, from scented candles to beauty products, captivating consumers with its comforting associations and creating a seasonal ambiance that resonates widely.

Notably, this year's conversations highlighted a rising trend toward apple cider and healthier options for enjoying pumpkin spice-infused drinks and foods. Despite its popularity, pumpkin spice remains a polarizing flavor, provoking strong reactions from both fans and critics. While some delight in the warm, spiced notes of pumpkin-infused treats, others express disdain for its ubiquity and perceived artificiality, underscoring the subjective nature of taste preferences and seasonal indulgences.



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Thank You!

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